

# Care Sheet for Gooseberries

## Care upon arrival

Potted plants can be planted in the soil at anytime of the year, as long as the ground is not frozen. If it is hot summer, the plants will need to be watered twice weekly if it is dry. If you are not ready to plant yet, the plant should be fine kept near a front door where it can get light and you can keep an eye on it. Keep the potted plant watered, making sure the soil stays moist, but not sodden or overly soaked (don't leave it in standing water in a bucket or pond for more than a few hours or its roots will begin to die). If any part of the plant is broken from shipping, it is best to prune that piece off where the break occurred. Make sure to NOT cut a fruit tree off below its graft union (marked with a splotch of paint)—below this is only rootstock which will not produce quality fruit. If the plant is broken below the graft union, immediately splint and wrap it so it is rejoined, using scraps of plastic bag and rubber bands, or any type of tape should work. Using a piece of a stick and taping that well below and above the break should hold things in place until the wound heals over.

## General Information

may well be the easiest and most productive berry plant to grow in the US! They can do well even in less fertile soils but do not tolerate standing water around their roots. Gooseberries like as much sun as they can get, but can fruit very well even with half-day's worth of sun, and can take full shade if necessary. Deer and bird do not seem to bother them with their armory of stout thorns! Gooseberrie are self-fertile. Green and white blooms cover the bush in early spring, and marble-sized fruit follows the blooms. Ripening time is usually in early summer. Even though many folks think gooseberries are only good for pies, the varieties we offer are delightful to eat fresh off of the bush. When fully ripe, they have a great sweet-tart flavor fresh and are also great in jams, jellies, pies, tarts and other baked goods. An old fashioned treat is to whip up cooked gooseberries with whipped cream; this is called a "fool".

## Planting

Plan for a mature size of 5' tall by 5' wide when you pick your planting spot (it's very easy to forget your tiny plant will get to be this big). Keep 3-5' between gooseberries at planting time. 5' spacing will yield single plants you can walk around to harvest, but if you want a solid gooseberry hedge, plant them 3' apart. Keep in mind that gooseberries are very thorny, so don't put them too close to major walkways, or plan on pruning them back. If your soil is very compacted from construction or lots of walking traffic, take some time to loosen the soil (with a spade or garden fork) to 24" deep by 3' diameter before planting your plant. When you do plant it, carefully dig a hole that is the same size as the pot. Slide the tree out carefully from its pot and set it into the hole you dug, slightly below the level it was in the pot. Now

lightly firm the soil around the plant with your hands or foot so the plant can't rock back and forth easily. Always apply mulch of some sort (see below). Now with a hose or watering can, water the plant generously. Make sure the plant gets a good watering twice a week for its first year in the ground, either from a rain, or from you watering if it does not rain. Do not water if the weather is already wet! This can drown out the roots from too much water. In wetter parts of the country, it is good to put the plant on a slight mound so its roots can be above standing water during torrential rains. Conversely, put plants in shallow basins to collect and sink in rainwater if you live in a dry part of the country.

## **Pruning**

Gooseberries will bear fruit just fine if not pruned, but they will eventually look gangly and the fruit can be harder to harvest. Pruning gooseberries is best done in late winter when the buds are just beginning to swell (February thru early March here in southern Indiana). Use leather gloves to prune gooseberries because they are very thorny! In the first and second years, prune very little if any live wood off, but prune off any dead branches. After the bush gets some size to it, prune out only the thickest growth where it seems to be "clogged up"—these areas will cease to produce much fruit and can spread fruit rots to the rest of the good fruit. Try to prune off whole branches that are over 3 years old every few years—this will keep the plant productive. Otherwise, gooseberries respond very well to different styles of pruning and you should mainly aim to prune for good looks so you can enjoy it!

## **Fertilizing and Mulching**

Never put fertilizer into the hole when you are planting! It is best to wait until the second year to begin fertilizing. Mulching right away with material like wood chips, bark mulch, grass clippings, spoiled hay, straw, even shredded paper will do wonders for your plant (synthetic mulches like rubber or plastic will only keep the soil moist and discourage weeds). Mulch keeps the soil moist during dry spells, wicks the water away during wet weather, discourages weeds and breaks down into wonderful black rich humus that enriches the soil. No rototilling needed! Just keep adding more mulch material each year, starting with a 1' diameter circle at planting, and expanding the circle so it falls at the edges (drip line) of the branches as they grow outward. Starting the second year, it is good to add some sort of fertilizer on top of the ground (or old mulch) before you add new mulch. Keep the fertilizer in a circle near the drip line of the plant—this is where its feeder roots are. Manure is best, as it has a fairly balanced nutrient load, and it encourages soil life. Only apply a layer 1" thick, in a 1' wide band, and put mulch on top of this. The soil life will do the rest of the work incorporating it into the ground and making it available to plants. If using synthetic fertilizer, always go with the instructions on the package. For a plant treat, find some kelp meal at a local garden center or from an organic farmer, and sprinkle some of this around the drip line every 3-5 years. Note: if you are using hay with a good clover or alfalfa in it, there is no need to add manure! Watch your plant to see if you are using too much or too little fertilizer. It will send out excessively long and flimsy growth if you are using too much (and it won't fruit very much) and it will stay very small, growing little or not at all if you are using too little. If you have very acidic soils, adding a little lime may help problems as well.

## **Fruiting**

Gooseberries need very little attention or none at all to produce good fruit. Inevitably, some fruits will have some insect damage on them, but they are still fine to eat, and usually the bulk of the crop is flawless. Gooseberries are ripe when they turn a pinkish or red color, and you can test them by picking a few to eat. If they have no sweetness, just sharp sourness, wait a few more weeks. Even in baking, the gooseberries are much better tasting and require less sugar when used fully ripe. To safely and quickly harvest gooseberries, put a leather glove on your non-dominant hand, hold a branch up with this hand, and take your ungloved dominant hand and carefully “strip” the branch of its fruit. Repeat for all of the branches, and you’ll have a bucketful in no time! If you have a problem with the fruit rotting, try pruning the plant well the next year to open it up to more sun and wind flow. Stella Otto’s *The Backyard Berry Book* is a good book for more details on growing many different berries including gooseberries.